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EDMONTON TO JASPER 100 YEARS AGO

After the discovery of Athabaska pass in 1810 a new road to the riches of the Columbia was opened up, and from that time on the valley of North Saskatchewan became the main highway for the growing commerce between the Pacific coast and Montreal. After the union of the two great fur-trading companies in 1821; under the able administration of Governor Simpson, many of the smaller trading posts built during the bitter struggle for supremacy in the fur-trade were closed down, and in an increasing measure the Saskatchewan carried the riches of the north and the west en route to the headquarters on the bay and to Montreal.

By that time Simon Fraser had followed the river which bears his name to its mouth; the Columbia river and Athabaska pass had become known as the shortest and easiest way to Astoria on the Pacific coast. Forts dotted the country westward from Chipewyan to the headwaters of the Peace river and on into the interior of New Caledonia, Edmonton, Dunvegan, Jasper House, Fort Assiniboine, and Chipewyan were centres of colorful activity.

MANY HORSES READY

From 900 to 1,000 horses were kept in readiness at Horse Hills, 10 miles from Edmonton, and wagon and pack trains had cut a well-marked trail to Fort Assiniboine on the Athabaska, where the water route to Jasper and boat encampment on the Columbia began again.

Indians, half-breeds, voyageurs and Scottish traders crowded about the gates at Fort Edmonton, and many travelers whose names are famous in the history of western Canada were yearly or monthly visitors at various stopping places from Cumberland House to Jasper, Horses were procured from the Blackfeet, and in the journal of Alexander Henry, the younger, who spent the years from 1808 to 1811 on the Saskatchewan between Vermilion and the Rocky Mountains, we get an idea of the price of a good animal.

"A keg of rum, two fathoms of twist tobacco, 20 balls, and powder enough to fire them, one awl, one scalper, one steel and one flint" was the price of a good horse. To make a nine-gallon keg of liquor we generally put in four or five quarts of high wine, then filled it up with water."

During the winter months Indians traveled every day along the trails to the nearest forts, at Assiniboine, Dunvegan, Edmonton, Jasper House, Fort Chipewyan, etc., with their furs. The tribes usually came in a body. The custom was always the same; a short distance from the fort the tribe halted and sent a delegation to announce their arrival. Presents of tobacco and rum were then sent out from the fort, after which the chief and his principal men entered the gates and trading began. Prices were fixed each year at the meeting of the factors at Fort William. During the trading months of the winter, every man in the fort was busy at some necessary work; boats were built, canoes repaired, pemmican was packed, and hunters roamed the plains for food. At Edmonton, huge ice-houses capable of storing

hundreds of buffalo carcasses, were kept filled with supplies, and Alexander Henry notes that when the Nor'West company abandoned Fort Vermilion in 1810, 400 limbs of buffalo meat were left in the ice house.

LONG CANOE ROUTE

At Edmonton the long overland trek of 90 miles to old Fort Assiniboine was begun. Horses and dog teams were used; then from Fort Assiniboine to Jasper House an up-current paddle of 200 miles confronted the voyageurs. In Alexander Ross' book "Fur Hunters of the Far West" there is an excellent description of the way in which the partners of the Hudson's Bay company traveled.

"The bourgeois is carried on board his canoe upon the back of some sturdy fellow generally appointed for the purpose. He seats himself on a convenient mattress, somewhat low in the centre of the canoe, his gun by his side. No sooner is he at his ease than his pipe is presented by his attendant and he begins to smoke while his silken banner undulates over the stern of his painted vessel. Then the bending paddles are plied, and the fragile craft speeds through the currents with a degree of fleetness not to be surpassed, yell upon yell from the hearty crew proclaiming their prowess and skill.

A hundred miles performed, night arrives; the bands jump out quickly into the water, and their nabob and his companions are supported to terra firma. A roaring fire is kindled and supper is served. His honor then retires to his repose. At dawn of day they set out again: the men now

and then relax and light their pipes; but no sooner does the headway of the canoe die away than they renew their labors and their chorus, a particular guide being selected to lead the song."

What were the songs they sang on the Jasper trail one hundred years ago? Sharp, staccato things suited to time the swift strokes of the paddle while working up stream, and later, on the return journey, quiet songs of home, or religious chants, to suit the more leisured rate. Songs that forever find their way to the heart of the French Canadian wherever you find him, accompanied the voyageur through the wilderness.

"A la claire fontaine,
M'en allant promener,
J'ai trouve l'eau si bell";

or the mournful notes of "Oh little Rock"--the first Canadian song.

"When it is practicable to make way in the dark, says Alexander Ross, four hours is the voyageur's allowance of rest; and at times, on boisterous lakes and bold shores, they keep for days and nights together on the water, without intermission and without repose. They sing to keep time to their paddles; they sing to keep off drowsiness caused by their fatigue; and they sing because the bourgeois like it."

On the evening of the second day the brigade would arrive in the pleasant valley where the Miette and Snaring and Maligne join to swell the Athabaska on its way to the

Arctic. Here was Henry House opposite the mouth of the Miette: "A neat little group of wood huts suited to the climate of the country, rendered comfortable and filled with cheerful, happy inmates."

SKIRL OF THE PIPES

Then the bag-pipes would echo out through the hills--if Governor Simpson were of the party--and there would be hearty hand-shakes, merry shouting and rum all round.

"When about to arrive at the place of their destination, they dress with neatness, put on their plumes, and a chosen song is raised. They push up against the beach as if they meant to dash the canoe into splinters, but most adroitly back their paddles at the right moment, while the foreman springs on shore and, seizing the prow, arrests the vessel in its course. On this joyful occasion every person advances to the waterfront, and great guns are fired to announce the bourgeois' arrival. A general shaking of hands takes place as if often happens that people have not met for years."

A light canoe, leaving the Pacific and travelling by way of the Columbia to Jasper and down the Athabaska overland to the Saskatchewan and on to Lake Winnipeg and the Great Lakes would leave Fort Astonia (Astoria?) at the mouth of the Columbia on the first of April and reach Fort William on July 1.

A light canoe would leave the Pacific coast and reach Montreal in a hundred days, and one from Montreal to the Pacific in the same time.

The life of the voyageur was a difficult one, but they were men of amazing capacity. Sir John Franklin in his Journal of the first expedition to the Arctic, tells of arriving at Fort Resolution after a desperate struggle during which the canoemen paddled 36 hours without ceasing, yet upon arrival they arranged a party and danced all night long.

One voyageur quoted in Lawrence Burpee's "On the Old Athabaska Trail" tells this sorty of his life. "I have been forty-two years in this country. For 24 years I have been a light-canoe man. No portage was too long for me, my end of the canoe never touched the ground till I saw the end of the portage. Fifty songs a day were nothing to me. I could carry, paddle and sing with any man I ever saw. No water, no weather ever stopped the paddle or the song."

Thus the Jasper trail one hundred years ago, alive with industry rich in color, vibrant with song and good cheer; a romantic background for the Jasper trail of today.

RECALLED IN DREAMS

Let anyone with imagination; young enough to see visions and old enough to believe in dreams,walk quietly out from Jasper Lodge on a summer night when the moon has thrown a silver curtain over the valley and follow one of the many paths that lead to the river. Along the bank not far from the old Fort bridge he should see the light of a camp-fire and around it in the glow of the flames he will see a group of red-coated voyageurs, and in the centre a dignified Scot with plaid over his shoulder. Then if he

listens he will hear strange tales told of the chasse-galerie, the loup-garou, the feu ollet. Perhaps the Scot will sing that loveliest of Canadian songs:

"From the lone shelling of the misty island,
Oceans divide us and a waste of seas.
But still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides."

Most certainly if he waits long enough he will hear "Envoyons d'l'avant nos gens, Envoyons d'l'avant," and "C'est L'aviron qui nos mene en haut."

Then Jasper with all its color and romance will claim him for its own and like the Blackfoot Indian after his first drink from the Saskatchewan, he must always return.